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AUTHOR Lemke, June Canty
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ABSTRACT

The needs of rural teachers differ significantly from those of teachers who begin their careers in urban and suburban districts, where staff and resources are more plentiful. Significant problems exist in finding and retaining rural teachers. This paper presents findings of a 1988 survey of 256 small or rural schools in four Southern California counties (Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and San Diego). The survey asked principals to identify support services for beginning teachers, continuing education programs, and inservice programs specifically designed to increase teacher retention. Rural administrators reported that they usually offered mentor teachers as support providers for new teachers. Meetings with other staff members were also frequently used to facilitate adjustment. The most frequently used labor development strategy was school paid travel to professional meetings. Relatively few administrators reported offering tuition reimbursement. The survey's results indicated that attrition from the teaching profession was not a serious problem, possibly because of southern California's high population growth and relatively good working conditions. School districts also seemed to be providing many of the support services for beginning teachers that the literature suggests. The data suggest that: (1) potential teachers could be better educated about working in rural areas; (2) districts should consider cooperative efforts for teacher inservice and continuing education programs; and (3) universities might make it easier for rural teachers to participate in graduate programs. (TES)

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June Canty Lemke, Ed. D.
Assistant Professor of Education
University of Redlands
Redlands, California 92373
(714) 793-2121

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"SUPPORTING BEGINNING TEACHERS IN RURAL AND SMALL SCHOOLS"

Introduction

This paper will present the findings of a Summer 1988 survey of 256 schools in five counties in Southern California housed in districts which are small or rural. The survey asked principals to identify: 1) the services provided to support beginning teachers, 2) the services provided to continuing teachers for professional development, and 3) the inservice education programs specifically targeted to increase retention of teachers. The survey was preceded by a review of the literature concerning the needs of beginning teachers in small and rural school districts. This review showed the needs of these teachers differ significantly from the needs of teachers who begin their careers in urban and suburban districts that employ a much larger number of teachers and have greater resources.

Specifically, this paper will: 1) present a summary of the pertinent literature that shows that the needs of beginning teachers in rural and small schools differ significantly from the needs of other beginning teachers; 2) describe the 1988 survey methodology; 3) present the data gathered as a result of the survey showing the ways these districts handle this problem, the ways they reduce teacher attrition rates, and the topics their inservice education programs address; 4) present the information collected about the vacancy rate anticipated and reasons for the openings; and 5) will provide conclusions from the study and a recommended bibliography.

Review of the Literature

The statistics concerning teacher attrition rates shows serious problems: 26% of new teachers leave the profession after their first two years and 60% of all teachers leave after their first five years of teaching (Henry, 1986, p. 10). The two most frequently cited reasons are that they leave to accept a job that pays more and that they are unable to cope with the problems of teaching (Henry, 1986, p. 17). The concerns that beginning teachers share are problems with classroom management, student discipline, making the adjustment to the physical demands of teaching, and managing the instructional demands of teaching. Other problems cited

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include difficulties managing interpersonal relationships with parents and staff, the sacrifice of leisure time, and justification of work demands to others outside the workplace (Myton, 1984, p. 8).

The segment of the educational system represented by rural and small schools is sizeable and the problems they face are real and deserve attention. There are approximately 12,000 small and rural school districts in the United States, accounting for approximately 67% of all schools. Approximately 500,000 students (35% of all students) attend small schools and approximately 50,000 teachers are employed. More than 25% of all school districts enroll less than 300 students (Swift, 1984, p. 1). The major problems for new teachers in rural districts, according to district administrators, include the adjustment to geographic isolation, population sparsity, and difficulty with "community fit" into the lifestyle and expectations of the community (Horn, 1985, p. 13). The attrition rate in rural and small schools is extremely high; Helge and Marrs (1981, p. 12) reported a turnover rate of 30-50% in rural areas, culminating in a complete turnover every three years. Many districts report difficulty in locating qualified applicants for positions that are vacant for long periods of time (Helge and Marrs, 1981, p. 2).

Teachers in these schools report there are many positive features to working in small schools and communities, including small class size, increased opportunity for individualized instruction and the chance to know each child as an individual, fewer behavioral problems, less bureaucracy, greater student and parent participation in schools and school activities, greater heterogeneity of the social class, and a sense of greater teacher impact on the curriculum (Miller and Sidebottom, 1985, p. 3 and Swift, 1984, p. 1).

The problems arise in finding qualified teachers for these positions. The characteristics described "ideal" for a teacher in a rural school include being certified to teach more than one subject area or grade level in the same classroom during the same time span, being able to teach students with a wide range of abilities in a single classroom, and being able to overcome the students' cultural differences and add to their understanding of the larger society. Other desirable characteristics include being prepared to supervise several extra-curricular activities and the ability to adjust to the uniqueness of the community in terms of social opportunities, lifestyles, and loss of privacy (Campbell, 1985, p. 7 and Horn, 1985, p. 14).

Administrators report they assist beginning teachers in rural schools by offering a pre-school year orientation program, by pairing the new teacher

with a master teacher, by assigning the new teacher an out of class project that requires interaction with other school personnel, and by making regular visits to the beginning teacher's classroom (Miller and Sidebottom, 1985, p. 26). Researchers also recommend that these problems may be eased by increasing inservice practices, initially reducing teaching and other instructional responsibilities and increasing time for planning and organizing instruction, providing opportunities to observe the teaching of more experienced colleagues, and offering opportunities for beginning teachers to interact with one another (Swift, 1984, p. 2).

Small and rural school districts also report difficulty in retaining qualified teachers. Included in the literature are suggestions for several long term strategies including reimbursement of dues for professional association memberships, opportunities for sabbatical and faculty exchange programs, reimbursement of tuition, and provision of release time for travel to professional meetings. Suggestions for inservice and staff development activities in small or rural schools include the use of alternative instructional formats such as cable and 2-way television systems and correspondence courses and the development of regional inservice education centers. Another suggestion is to give salary increments for teaching assignments which require multiple subject areas or grade level responsibilities (Swift, 1984, p. 2).

In conclusion, the literature shows that the needs of all beginning teachers are great, but that the needs of teachers who begin their careers in small and rural schools differ significantly from those of other teachers and are even more difficult to solve, resulting in increased attrition.

The Survey

The first major task was to develop a questionnaire to identify:

1) what support services are made available to beginning teachers (mentor teachers, meetings with school support service providers, meetings with community members),
2. what support for professional development is made available for teachers in those districts (tuition remission, support for travel, other programs),
3. what inservice education programs are conducted by small or rural school districts (topics, who is responsible for planning, who does the training),
4. what vacancies were expected for the 1988-1989 school year,
5. what the reasons are for the vacancies (population growth, retirements, resignations).

The next step was to identify the districts in four counties in Southern California (Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino, and San Diego) who enroll fewer than 5000 students; 270 schools in 66 districts were identified. Many of the schools serve less than 250 students; most are located in outlying areas, although some are in small districts adjacent to suburban areas. All were public schools.

The questionnaires were mailed to the building principals with a return deadline set approximately two months later. The data was compiled two weeks after the deadline; 105 completed questionnaires were returned (approximately 39%). The breakdown of the number of questionnaires mailed and returned by schools in each county is shown below:

COUNTY NAME	NUMBER MAILED	NUMBER RETURNED	%
Orange	58	16	28
Riverside	44	24	61
San Bernardino	85	30	35
San Diego	83	35	42.

Support Services for Beginning Teachers

Administrators reported that they usually offer a mentor teacher as a support provider for new teachers. Meetings with other school staffmembers, including special support staff, are also used frequently to assist the new teacher in the adjustment to the school system. Relatively few principals reported they arranged meetings between the new teachers and key community persons. The data is shown below:

TYPE OF PROGRAM	TOTAL	OR CTY	RIV CTY	SB CTY	SD CTY
Mentor	90%	94%	100%	80%	89%
Meetings w/support staff	79%	81%	75%	73%	86%
Meetings w/community	13%	6%	25%	17%	6%
Other	85%	63%	92%	13%	66%.

(Key: OR - Orange, RIV - Riverside, SB - San Bernardino, SD - San Diego)

When asked what other types of support they offer, many principals reported they provided orientation programs and regularly scheduled meetings to assist the new teacher throughout the school year. Other frequently cited support strategies included assigning new teachers to special projects with other school personnel and assigning peer support teams. Less often mentioned included arranging for release time to allow the new teacher to observe other teachers, and arranging for tours of the district and meetings with school board members and student body

leaders. The totals are shown in the table below:

Type of Program	Number of times cited
Assigning to peer teams	10
Assigning a buddy teacher	7
Assigning a special project with others	12
Meetings with principal	17
Meetings with school board members	1
Meetings with student body leaders	1
Providing orientation sessions	21
Providing orientation handbooks	3
Arranging for a tour of the district	1
Providing support to attend conferences	1
Arranging for release time to observe	4.

Opportunities for Professional Development

Administrators responded that they use a variety of strategies to offer professional development opportunities to their teaching staff. The strategy most frequently cited was money for travel to conferences and professional meetings; relatively few reported they offer tuition reimbursement. For more specific information, please study the table below:

TYPE OF PROGRAM	TOTAL	OR CTY	RIV CTY	SB CTY	SD CTY
Tuition reimbursement	29%	25%	25%	30%	31%
Travel money	82%	56%	96%	80%	86%
Other	91%	49%	75%	100%	100%.

The other types of programs offered for professional development which were mentioned frequently include using SIP days for inservice programs, providing release time to allow teachers to attend conferences and professional meetings, advancement on the salary scale, and providing summer workshops. Less frequently mentioned were sabbatical programs, administrative internship programs, and arranging to import a university course to a more convenient location. For specific data, please see the table shown below:

TYPE OF PROGRAM	NUMBER OF TIMES CITED
SIP days for inservice	35
Advancement on the salary scale	11
Arranging for release time to attend conferences	16
Providing summer workshops	7
Importing university courses	2
Providing sabbatical programs	1
Providing administrative internship programs	1.

Inservice Education Topics

When asked which topics have been offered for inservice education aimed at retention of their teaching staff, administrators responded that they have provided a wide array of current topics in recent years. Five topics were cited frequently: assertive discipline, clinical teaching and supervision, effective teaching strategies, curriculum alignment and AIMS, and cooperative learning. Many other topics were listed, but were cited less frequently; the specific responses are listed below:

TOPIC	NUMBER OF TIMES CITED
Curriculum alignment/AIMS	13
Cooperative learning	12
Clinical teaching and supervision	11
Effective teaching strategies	10
Assertive discipline	9
Critical thinking	5
Stress management	4
Computing for teachers	3
Learning styles	3
Mastery learning	2
Writing across the curriculum	2
Disaster preparedness	1
Motivation/reinforcement theory	1
Substance abuse	1
Jazzercise	1
Holistic scoring	1.

Number and Types of Vacancies for 1988-89

When asked about the number and types of vacancies in teaching positions anticipated for the 1988-89 school year, principals reported varying levels of success in attracting and retaining qualified teachers. The most frequently cited reason for the vacancies was the opening of a new classroom. Teachers leaving the district was the reason cited next most

often; teachers transferring to another position in the district or retiring were the next most frequently cited reasons. Teachers going on leave of absence was the next most frequently cited reason, with teachers leaving the profession listed relatively infrequently. For specific data, please see the table below:

REASON FOR VACANCY	PER CENT CITED
Opening of new classroom	34
Leaving district	22
Transferring within district	13
Retiring	11
Going on leave of absence	9
Leaving the profession	4
Other	6.

Other comments

When invited to make other comments, administrators responded with many characteristics which they described as contributors or inhibitors to their success in attracting and retaining qualified teachers. It was extremely interesting to note that one principal might list a characteristic as a problem, while another principal listed it as a positive element. The specific responses are listed below:

CHARACTERISTIC	SEEN AS PROBLEM	SEEN AS SUCCESS
Salary level	8	5
Climate	3	8
Commute from residential areas	3	7
Good staff development programs	0	8
Distance to university	2	5
Locating bilingual/special ed. tchrs	5	0
Support from principal/board	0	4
Small town culture	3	1
Early hiring practices	1	3
Adjusting to cultural changes	3	0
Hiring military spouses	2	1
Giving credit for prior teaching	1	2
Year-round school schedule	1	1
Housing costs	1	0
California credential requirements	1	0.

Conclusions

After examining the data from the survey and comparing it with the suggestions from the research, several conclusions come to mind. First, it

appears that attrition due to teachers leaving the profession is not a serious problem, possibly due to the surge in population growth in Southern California and relatively good working conditions. Second, school districts in this area seem to be providing many of the support services for beginning teachers that the research suggests, although some services, such as help in adjusting to the local community, are not often provided. Many districts reported difficulty in attracting teachers certified to teach in bilingual classrooms and special education was pointed out as another problemmatic area. Lower salaries in districts in rural areas were often cited as problems as well.

It does appear that some of the problems reported in districts in other regions of the United States are not being experienced in Southern California. However, there are enough problems reported to heighten concern on the part of teacher educators; concerns such as inclusion in the teacher preparation program of field experiences in small districts and in rural areas to make potential teachers aware of both the benefits and drawbacks of working in these districts so as to encourage them to seek employment. It also appears that universities should make more effort to enable teachers in these areas to participate in graduate programs on-site or by television or other innovative delivery techniques.

The data also suggests that districts should consider working cooperatively to provide inservice and continuing education programs and to try to be more flexible in giving credit for prior teaching experience.

The concerns of small and rural schools districts in Southern California about recruitment and retention and the needs of beginning teachers in these districts are real and deserve continued attention; these problems will not disappear and in order for the quality of education in the region to continue at present levels, these problems must be addressed.

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